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Social Learning

Introduction

In this chapter, social learning is explained. Learning through observation, identification and imitation is discussed. In observational learning, four interrelated sub-processes are presented, these include (a) the attentional processes; (b) the retention process; (c) motoric reproduction skills and (d) the role of reinforcement. The factors affecting social learning and socialization are also discussed.

The concept of social learning

Social learning, comprises knowledge or abilities acquired by a person in the process of socialisation. Human beings learn their characteristic ways of behaving not only through classical and operant conditioning. Social learning theory stresses a special kind of discrimination learning called observational learning or modelling. Social learning calls for some initiative on the part of the learner. It is another dimension to the process of socialization where novel responses are brought into the repertory of the individual. Social learning theory holds that a large amount of human learning is done vicariously through observing another person that makes skilled responses and then trying to imitate the response of the model. Thus, the observer can learn and later perform novel responses without having made them before.

The family is the prime source of observational learning during childhood. Parents are children's first models and important figures in the lives of young children. Albert Bandura has played a leading role in directing attention to the importance of social learning in the process of socialization.

Learning through observation

During childhood, children are very susceptible to the influence of parents as the family is a prime source of observational learning during this period. Many human skills such as pronunciation of foreign words could not be acquired without observational learning. In the analysis of observational learning, psychological studies have identified four in-

ter-related sub-processes. These are the attentional processes, the retention process, motoric reproduction skills and the role of reinforcement.

(a) *The attentional process*

For an individual to learn a new segment of behaviour, he must first attend to the person displaying the behaviour. In other words, the model stimulus must be attended to by the subject, if he is to learn from the model. One has to orient oneself to the model's behaviour, ignoring others and potentially competing stimuli in the immediate environment. Merely observing a model's behaviour may not lead to learning, unless what the model happens to be doing is relevant to some need of the observer.

(b) *Retention process*

If the model's behaviour is to exert influence upon the observer's behaviour at a much later point, then the model's behaviour as a stimulus event has to be coded, symbolically represented and retained over a period. The new responses acquired are retained by the individual by reversing the responses vicariously (mentally) in an actual behaviour.

(c) *Motoric reproduction skills*

This is a situation where an individual knows "cognitively" and roughly what is to be done but nevertheless is still relatively unskilled at the performance itself. Skilled activities like driving a car typically require other small components, even though the sequence of acts may be communicated by observation, the fine motor co-ordination required within the components themselves may be absent in the beginner so that the entire performance appears not to have been perfected.

(d) *Role reinforcement*

An individual is likely to perform or inhibit a vicariously learned response to the extent that he or she believes he will be rewarded or punished for performing the act. Reinforcement affects who or what the observer will attend to and how actively he codes and rehearses the model behaviour. The anticipation of reinforcement is treated as a motivational factor determining expression of cognitions and behaviours learned earlier.

Learning through identification

Social learning is also based on identification which implies positive

regard and a desire to affiliate with the behaviour model. Identification is an indepth form of modelling. It is a kind of positive regard for and a desire to affiliate with the behaviour model. The learner imagines himself in the models place, empathizes and behaves the way he believes the model is behaving. This behaviour modelled does not include the less visible aspects of the model's behaviour such as thinking, feeling and valuing.

Learning through imitation

Imitation plays an important role in learning. Babies for instance, can imitate mouth movements very early in infancy. By age one year, many babies tend to imitate activities readily and eagerly. Imitative behaviour is the key to understanding such important psychological phenomenon as language learning, attitude formation and personality development.

Social learning and socialization

Social learning plays an important role in the process of socialization. Psychoanalysts suggest that the child for instance employs his parents as models as the parents possess the power to express love to the child or to with-hold it. The experiences of the child when love is withdrawn by the mother, when the child misbehaves, influence the child to take on the mother's behaviour in order to win the mother's love or approval, through the process of imitation, identification or introjection.

As discussed earlier, one important independent variable that leads to imitation is the model's power to reward. Thus, parents, who have more opportunities to reinforce their children's behaviour more are to influence the behaviour of their children more or children of such parents are likely to imitate the behaviour of their parents more.

Factors underlying social learning and socialization

The factors underlying social learning also affect socialization and there are several reasons why we learn socialized forms of behaviour. Some of these factors include expression of love to the model, urge to conform, drives and needs to mention a few.

Expression of love

Experiments have shown that a child of warm, tolerant and caring parents is more likely to imitate the behaviour of his parent than the child whose parent is cold and detached. A possible explanation could be that the parents who are warm and tolerant are likely to interact more

frequently with their children compared to parents who are cold and detached.

Urge to conform

There is no doubt that an individual would like to be accepted in the society just as the child would like to be approved by his parents. This urge to conform could affect social learning.

Drives and needs

Needs and drives are arousal agents which describe states that give the organism a readiness to respond when the proper stimulus appears in the environment. Drive specifically is a set of internal conditions in an organism that can be aroused by internal or external stimuli and can lead the organism to seek a goal. Attainment of the goal reduces the drive and reinforces the behaviour leading to the goal.

Need refers to a deficiency or deficit in some stimulus that is important for the well-being of the organism. Need may also refer to the tension that results from the deficit, such as need for love. An individual is likely to learn such behaviours that are of importance to him or that will meet his needs.

Need for arousal

In a drive state, the organism is aroused. The attainment of the goal thus leads to satisfaction and a reduction of arousal. On the other hand, some activities in life are satisfying not because they reduce arousal but because they increase it. Situations that contain elements that are novel, surprising, ambiguous or complex are not only arousing but could be reinforcing at the same time. This is to say that we are likely to prefer experiences that are interesting or exciting to use rather than those that are dull and uneventful.

Summary

Social learning is part of the whole process of socialization. Social learning involves learning through observation, identification and imitation.

In observational learning, an individual must attend to a particular behaviour before it is learned. The behaviour learned has to be retained to make any impression on the learner. Some skilled activities require other minor components of activities before the particular behaviour observed is perfected. Reinforcement affects what behaviour is to be learned and the extent to which it could be learnt.

Social learning is also based on identification and imitation. Many factors affect social learning and socialization. Such factors include favourable disposition on the part of the model to the observer, the urge to conform to approved behaviours by the individual and when the behaviours are likely to satisfy the needs of the individual.

Follow-up activities

1. What is social learning?
2. Discuss briefly how learning through observation, identification and imitation occurs.
3. Enumerate and discuss those factors you think could affect social learning.

Out-of-class activities

1. Select two persons, an observer and a model.
2. Let the subject (the observer) sit down to watch the model perform a particular behavioural sequence.
3. Test the subject (the observer) later under specified conditions to determine to what extent the subject's behaviour mimics the one displayed by the model.
4. You may compare what the subject does with control subjects tested without having observed the model.
5. Arrive at a possible conclusion.

References for further reading

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